

# Memory and commemoration<sup>1</sup>

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## Summary

Relations between explicit and implicit memory of traumatic events are discussed in context of common memory manipulations for present political reasons. Destructive consequences of stirring up group cohesion with negative emotions are emphasized. Reaction for traumatic event is discussed in context of mourning process. Memory of Shoah as unique traumatic experience is analyzed in perspective of commemoration and part of group common memory. Frizzing of individual memory process is suggested to be a consequence. Ways of commemoration of the Shoah and victims of the Holocaust in form of monuments are used as examples. As well as selected pieces of art. being a form of individual mourning

**memory, trauma, mourning**

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationship between the contents of memory and the effects of commemoration. Let me start by defining the terms used. The content of memory is obviously a complicated matter, even in the part of memory people are aware of. Most of it is hidden behind everyday matters we think about. A lot can be brought up and fill our awareness. Some memories appear there uninvited. It is unclear how much of memory content never shows up in the light of reason, but still influences our attitudes, decisions and actions.

Commemoration is an act that arises from an intention to keep the memory of a person or a thing alive. People are usually aware of their intentions. However, as only a part of human mental processes is explicit, conscious intentions can be based on unconscious motivations. Or, as it quite often happens, awareness of intentions

makes them appear rationalized, that is acceptable for the subject.

The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews offers a special opportunity to discuss the relationship between memory and commemoration. The Museum commemorates a significant group of citizens of the Polish state who identified themselves as Jews. They have lived here for several centuries. Longing for Jerusalem, they still belonged to this community. In fact, as a result of historical, political and social circumstances, a considerable proportion of Polish middle class in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Jewish or of Jewish origin. Almost all perished in the Shoah, or left the country due to recurring waves of anti-Semitic hate. The POLIN Museum was set up to testify to the life of Jews here across a thousand years. This impressive edifice and all it contains is a tribute to the Jewish culture, which had once flourished on both banks of the Vistula River.

The museum entrance hall is interpreted as a visualization of the parted waters of the Red

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Sea. But it also brings to mind a void. Within a light structure of a semitransparent building that looks as if it was about to take off into the sky, there is a heavy emptiness. It is not my intention to claim superiority of this interpretation over the architect's declared, conscious intention. But an association with a void seems to be unavoidable after the disappearance of the Jews as a consequence of the most dramatic genocide. The entrance to the museum exemplifies inseparable commemoration of those who perished in the Holocaust, of the Holocaust itself, and of tradition. In *The Book* the waters parted to open the way from Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land. Here, in the POLIN, stone walls open to the light, offering each visitor a possibility to fill it with their own imagination of a better future.

People live with the idea of a better future. Mental health workers should not be surprised. A number of studies on outcome predictors in serious mental disorders have found that optimism and hope were connected with a better outcome in chronic disorders. Loss of hope and pessimism characterize attitudes diagnosed now as depression, probably the most often used diagnostic category.

With the end of World War II, we were told "never again". The memory of disastrous events was fresh. Survivors had not shared their unimaginable sufferings yet. The mass, industrialized killing of millions was not a matter of public discourse. Terms such as Shoah and Holocaust had not yet been invented. The prevalent public strategy was later called a "conspiracy of silence". Nevertheless, places such as the Auschwitz Concentration Camp existed. Not all of them were demolished as was the camp in Płaszów, nor were they still being used as camps and prisons, as was Jaworzno.

Auschwitz has become a symbol of all places of the mass murder of the Jewish people, who were all to be killed. Its own symbol is the gate to Camp no. 1, with the iron inscription "Arbeit mach frei". In 1966 Jacek Waltoś painted *Overgrowing* (Fig.1). One can see this symbol of a symbol being overgrown by greenery, grass or perhaps weeds. Independently from the artist's conscious intention, this overgrowing is both the triumphal power of living nature, stronger than the remnants of (in)human industry, and concern for the preservation of the token of the past.

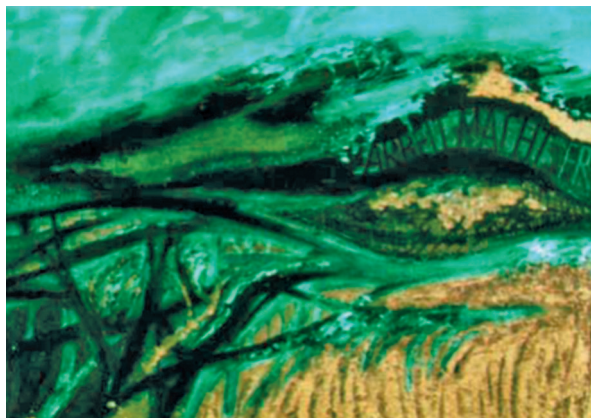


Fig. 1. Jacek Waltoś, *Overgrowing (Auschwitz)*, 1966, oil on felt, 61 × 80 cm

In this case, of death and suffering of millions. This piece of art confronts us with ambivalent tendencies – a need to forget, to allow life to triumph over death, and a need to remember.

Yes, the iron words "Arbeit macht frei" became the symbol of Auschwitz, which became the symbol of the Holocaust and of all atrocities inflicted on humanity between 1941 and 1945. But what does this symbolic monument commemorate? A crime against humanity? The victims who had perished in this crime? All those who suffered? Auschwitz, the monument and testimony, commemorates the victims, but at the same time it commemorates the people who had caused the disaster.

In 1992 Wisława Szymborska [1] published the poem *Reality demands*. David Rieff [2] recently quoted its opening lines in his paper on remembrance:

Reality demands  
we also state the following:  
life goes on.  
It does so near Cannae and Borodino,  
At Kosovo Polje and Guernica.

Rieff's purpose is finding a balance between the importance of memory (namely, the moral memory) and the fact that incorporating into memory an interpretation of past events tailored for the purpose of present political goals can be devastating. The problem is alarmingly important for so-called historical politics and is one of the hot topics in public debate in Poland. (However, Rieff does not include Poland in his polemic.)

The places listed by Szymborska in the quotation were famous for the slaughter of soldiers in

decisive battles in great military campaigns, and one – Guernica – for military bombing of civilians, probably the first in history. Mass killings have taken place across mankind's history, and they evidently became forgotten. But this does not mean that mass murders are equal, even if – in spite of them – “life goes on” in equal measure.

The poem ends with these lines:

What moral flows from this? Maybe none.

But what really flows is quickly-drying blood,  
and as always, some rivers and clouds.

On the tragic mountain passes  
the wind blows hats off heads  
and we cannot help  
but laugh.

(“Quickly drying blood”, according to David Rieff, is a remark Charles de Gaulle used in political discussion on French strategy in Algiers' war for independence.)

Rieff argues that collective memory, so important for group identity, can be manipulated for current political goals. He is investigating the ways it can be done and proposes it is by bringing up, or even creating false, events of defeat, injury and harm. The task is set: to strengthen the feeling of togetherness in large groups. He presents examples of effective applications of such a manipulation. A devastating aspect of group cohesion thus achieved is the promotion of primitive, negative emotions: anxiety, aggression and hate. Recalling my experience in mental healthcare, especially psychotherapy, I would argue that group cohesion achieved via negative emotions is destructive for the group as a whole and for its individual members.

History, comprising a whole range of events, is of unquestionable importance to both personal and group identity. Memories of some of these events form individual dignity, enhancing self-esteem. Memories of others, *vice versa*, are connected with pain and anxiety. Yet other memories are associated with feelings of shame or guilt. Some memories arouse anger, or even hate. Individuals, and groups too, try to cope with memories associated with negative emotions.

The main goal in treatment of trauma victims (today diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic-stress disorders) is to disrupt the strong connections of memory of a traumatic event

with negative emotions. Studies on animals identified such neuronal connections. Disconnection with the help of chemical compounds was proven to be effective, also in experiments on animals. These results have been interpreted on the grounds of memory reconsolidation theory [3]. Unfortunately, in clinical practice the effects of therapies based on this model appeared to be not so promising.

*Reality demands* confronts the reader with a disturbing felling of impropriety. How is it that a hat blown off by the wind still evokes laughter, even if it happens in the place of martyrdom? Does it mean that bloodshed is not remembered? And exactly what is, or is not, remembered?

Seventy years have passed since the end of World War II and the Shoah (according to official historical definition). Almost half of this time the extraordinary, industrialized and bureaucratized killing of millions of Europeans identified as Jews had been kept in a shadow of silence. The suffering of survivors had gone unrecognized, and death of so many was hidden behind figures. Horrifying and intimidating, but still cold figures. There was no denial of the facts at that time. The evidence was accessible almost everywhere in Europe. Leaders of the Allied Countries who had initially discounted information on mass extermination of Jews brought by Karski from Generalgouvernement to London and Washington, after the War set about to punish war criminals, masterminds and performers of crimes against humanity. Those who perished were remembered as the mass. Those who survived were not listened to with attention.

The shadow of silence covering the sufferings of victims was conceptualized as a “conspiracy”. But a conspiracy of silence, as used in social sciences (or even in Pius XI's encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* in 1937 pointing out not-involvement of Western democratic states against communism) implies a deliberate decision to avoid some troublesome issues. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the concept was coined, human rationality, so praised in the Enlightenment, was still valued. Pavlov's description of conditioning, Freud's contribution stressing the role of the unconscious, and findings of the neurosciences altogether brought us to a proper estimation of emotions and non-declarative (implicit) memory for the functioning of the human mind. Si-



lence in confrontation with unimaginable atrocities may seem opportunistic. Maria Orwid, developing her understanding of a conspiracy of silence, used the term “to freeze” as a reaction to the Shoah [4]. The “frozen” mind is incapable of mourning. In consequence, the memory of those who perished became deeply hidden in survivors’ minds as their personal pain. Commemoration concentrated on symbols, such as Auschwitz. And to some extent, unintentionally, also on perpetrators of all kind, even if in the form of anger and need of revenge.

Another painting by Jacek Waltoś I wanted to show you appeared to be unavailable. Acquired from a Warsaw gallery by an Israeli envoy, it has remained in a collection in Israel. But I got a print created in 1970 (Fig. 2).



**Fig. 2.** Jacek Waltoś, This one also couldn't be saved (1942), 1970, etching.

Both the oil painting and the print illustrate the complicated issue at hand. The picture is not a portrait of a Jewish girl who was murdered in the woods of Warzyce, where many were shot. Nor is it a portrait of a woman who had tried to help her. What it commemorates is the frustrated effort to save the girl's life. Another way of cultivating the memory of the Shoah is to end the anonymity of victims. Documentation collected in Yad Vashem, the Hall of Children, and in Yed Vashem, where their names are continuously spoken aloud, or a cenotaph commemorating the Jewish patients of the Babiński Hospital in Kraków, all call out the names of those who were to be forgotten (Fig. 3, Fig. 4, Fig. 5).



**Fig. 3.** Yad Vashem, Hall of names



**Fig. 4.** Yad Vashem, Childrens Memorial



**Fig. 5.** Cenotaph at The Babiński Hospital, Kraków



A similar intention lies behind placing small metal plates on the streets of European towns on houses inhabited by Jewish families before they perished in the Holocaust. Or a memorial to Bruno Schulz in the palace he was shot in, near his house in Drohobycz (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Plate commemorating death of Bruno Schulz, Drohobycz

Quite the opposite, anonymity dominates the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. Its paralyzing expression is concentrated on the enormous mass character of this genocide (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The Holocaust Monument, Berlin

Yet another way of commemoration are the cenotaphs with the names of Shoah victims erected by their families. Maria Orwid, for example, placed two small *macevas* in the New Jewish Cemetery in Kraków, one commemorating her beloved father, who died in Lwów and the other one for family members, who were killed in the woods and in the camp in Bełżec (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. Macevas erected by Maria Orwid

This was her personal act of commemoration, independent of the official monument in Grochowski woods. The founding of monuments, even as tiny as that erected by Maria Orwid, is relatively new. The tendency is congruent with Yad Vashem's efforts to save the names of Shoah victims. The rationale for this monumental work is probably complex. However, its effect is in supporting the perception of the Shoah as individual history of individual people, and, in this way, diverting the memory from an anonymous mass to individual persons.

For decades following the silence and a focus on the punishment of perpetrators, the Shoah was remembered as an unimaginable tragedy of a nation. Its size, the millions killed, engulfed individual human beings. Does founding an individual monument for a lost relative or friend make the mourning process easier? Or is it a consequence of the mourning process? Watching impressive monuments erected by the entrance to Yad Vashem does not help to answer these questions. Their form brings to mind problems created by Taj Mahal. Is this mausoleum an effect of a sublimation of pain? A commemoration of a beloved wife? Or rath-

er, an expression of the self/narcissistic traits in the widower? Maybe it is all of those things together.

Let me end with a quote from a paper I published some time ago in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, following a rally in commemoration of the liquidation of the Kraków Ghetto [5]:

"The Memory Rally is different on the World Holocaust Day. This is a local event, an expression of the town citizens' memory about their fellow citizens who were murdered because they were Jews. Kraków Memory March, an official demonstration with the participation of local authorities, is an intimate event. ... the identity of the March participants is their own private matter ... they are joined in pietistic pilgrimage to the grave. But only a few had lost, in Płaszów or other places of the extermination of Jews, their relatives, friends or even neighbors, or people they had met by chance. The majority can compare this day and this march to visiting a fam-

ily grave. There is, however, a great difference. There is no tomb in Płaszów. We do not know [the victims'] names, what they looked like. We can read about them ... But this pilgrimage to the nonexistent tomb has nothing to do with a pilgrimage in Verona to the tomb of Juliet, who had never existed. ..."

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